

C O N F I D E N T I A L ISTANBUL 001025

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL AM TK

SUBJECT: ARMENIAN CHURCH POLITICS AND TURKEY-ARMENIA
TENSIONS

REF: ISTANBUL 399

Classified By: Consul-General David Arnett for Reasons 1.5 (b & d).

¶1. (SBU) Armenian Patriarch Mesrob II advised the Ambassador during his July 16 farewell call that aggressive efforts by the Armenian Catholicos in Etchmiadzin to assert primacy over the Armenian community in Turkey could increase Turkish tensions on the Armenian issue in the coming months.

Specifically, the Catholicos expects to complete work in October on a "constitution" for the Armenian Church that would claim that all unused or vacated church properties around the world should revert to Etchmiadzin. Given the extreme sensitivity regarding properties owned by the minority religious communities in Turkey, Mesrob opined that such efforts would almost certainly feed nationalist suspicions regarding Armenian claims on Turkish property. While conceding that there would be serious questions about the legal validity of such a "constitution" for Armenian communities in countries around the world, Mesrob argued that at a minimum such claims would raise bilateral tensions between Ankara and Yerevan.

¶2. (SBU) Mesrob added that the "constitution" issue is merely the latest in a series of attempts by Etchmiadzin (and Yerevan) to assert its primacy over Armenian communities around the world, including those that fall under the Patriarchs of Istanbul, Silicia, and Jerusalem (reftel). Together these three Patriarchs have resisted these efforts, but their objections are unlikely to block the new constitution. Mesrob also claimed that medals recently awarded to members of the local community by the Catholicos (without consulting the Istanbul Patriarchate) were further evidence of an attempt to assert its primacy and to divide the local community.

¶3. (SBU) Mesrob told the Ambassador that he had recently sent a letter to the Turkish Foreign Ministry to alert them to these efforts and warn of the increased tension that extraterritorial claims could impose on the Armenian issue. Mesrob admitted that he is worried the Ministry may not interpret his letter in the "good faith" in which it was intended. In addition to a general warning, Mesrob said that he had used the letter as an opportunity to argue that the minorities in Turkey be given "legal status" in order to resist efforts by other elements of the Armenian Church to assert authority within the Armenian community in Turkey.

¶4. (C) Comment: When it comes to the volatile issues of the Armenian "genocide" and Turkish-Armenian relations, the 70,000-strong Armenian community in Turkey regularly finds itself caught between a rock (Armenia, the Armenian Orthodox Church, and the Armenian Diaspora) and a hard place (Turkey).

If Mesrob's description of the ongoing developments within the Armenian Church proves accurate, this issue could become yet another source of tension between Armenia and Turkey.

ARNETT